

Table tennis and childhood memories

BY MONICA SCALF

Earlier this winter Santa dropped off a Ping Pong table at our house. As he was shoving it down the chimney, I'm sure he thought it would be the perfect way to counteract the various electronic gadgets under the tree. When we awoke on Christmas morning, I was thrilled to have a retro way to spend quality time with the kids, a way that didn't require a video screen.

After a few days of playing within our own little foursome, we were tired and bored of having the same champion over and over. And of course, because I'm writing this column, I guess you figured out that more times than not I was the big winner.

After a dozen times of my 11-year-old son walking away looking like a wounded puppy and my husband spending way too much time figuring out the physics of why his shots were soaring 6 inches past the edge of the table, I decided it would be good to expand the pool of players by asking some friends over to have a Ping Pong tournament. Among others, I asked my brother, Andy, and his family to join in the fun. (And, dare I say, to witness my unbelievable skills.)

In order to fully understand my story, you have to know that Andy is the kind of guy that people name their children after. To say that you didn't like him would be like saying you don't like peanut butter, puppy dogs, or playgrounds. In other words, Andy is the ultimate nice guy.

That is, until he gets on a Ping Pong table. Apparently nice guys don't always finish last.

Little did I know there was a table tennis Olympian lurking under his teddy bear exterior. And having shared the past 37 years of my life with him, I consider myself an Andy expert. I can tell you the model and color of his favorite childhood Hot Wheel, the name of his first girlfriend, and the exact count of how many times he drove the car without permission on a snow day. But I could have never guessed the intensity with which he could hit a little white ball across a 6-inch net.

As he systematically crushed one opponent after the next, I knew it was inevitable that we would meet in the championship match. I wish there were more of a story, but he killed me. I think I got only 3 or 4 points in three games (and that was only because his niceness got the best of him). And on the final game point, my defeat came when he smashed

one on me to the right corner.

Now if this had been my husband who had beaten me to a pulp, the repercussions would have lasted for weeks. But the funny thing was, with Andy I wasn't even mad. I relished in the rare chance to just be a kid who was playing a game with her big brother at a time when both of our lives are crammed fuller than a high school locker.

It had been a long time since the days of playing Atari in our basement or wiffle ball in the back yard. We had since coated ourselves in the responsibilities of adulthood: working the daily grind, paying the orthodontist, fixing the John Deere, volunteering at the school fundraiser, not to mention negotiating with our teenage daughters. But somehow as I looked across at Andy, a successful business and family man, with graying temples and a few well-earned worry lines, I could still see the kid that I grew up with. We've shared not only a mom and a dad, but also a common history from that magical time in our lives when we thought we could mold our lives like Play-Doh. And those memories are even better than winning the championship.

That match helped me to remember that every adult starts out as a kid with a genuine thirst for the game of life. And if we're lucky, we can tap into that enthusiasm even after all the ups and downs, the commitments and obligations, and the joys and the sorrows of growing up. Sometimes adulthood can be like driving with you blinker on, after a while you just forget to ever turn it off. Sometimes it takes something to remind you.

Even if the reminder comes in the form of a forehand smash. Good game, Andy.



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